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The Representation of Narrative: What Happens in *Othello*

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The usual structure of Shakespeare's plays is that after an expository first act, the three central acts — the main body of the play — are given over to dramatic representation of the main body of the narrative action that constitutes the story and the plot, before crisis and resolution are achieved in act 5; thus the central portions of *King Lear* deal with the progressive degeneration of both the Lear and the Gloucester families, those of *Hamlet* with the Prince's progress from uncertainty to commitment and with the changing fortunes of the Polonius household, and those of *Macbeth* with the period of Macbeth's unchallenged rule. When it comes to *Othello*, however, Shakespeare is forced to adopt a rather different method, for the simple reason that the events which provide the nominal mainspring to drive the plot of *Othello* never in fact take place. Desdemona's adultery with Cassio, on which all Othello's actions depend, is quite literally a non-event; even if it were not, it could never, as Iago so pithily reminds Othello, be represented on the stage. In its place Shakespeare must put something else to act as the central business of the play; instead of the representation of an act, he offers us the representation of Iago's story of that act — which thus stands, in fact, as the representation of a representation. In so doing, he draws attention to the fact and effect of performance in itself, as well as to its status as mode of representation, as Iago stages fictive playlets and deploys as his props two other ways of mediating the contents of the mind to the outside world: things written, and things dreamed. As this play of non-events, slippages

and substitutions unfolds, writing, performance and dreamwork will be insistently played off against each other until we may well be unsure of what happens in *Othello*.

That this play which is so preeminently about stories should have at its heart a story is apt. It could perhaps be said that all of Shakespeare's plays necessarily display a strong interest in modes of narration, but what seems to me to distinguish *Othello* from the other works of Shakespeare's early and middle period is precisely the radical falsity of the rooted belief that most strongly informs the hero's actions. Lear perceives his mistake very early on, and Hamlet obsessively tests the truth of what he is told, but *Othello* gives us a central character whose view of events is so divorced both from our own and from "reality" that he has lent his name to a delusional psychiatric condition, the Othello syndrome (see Enoch and Trethowan). Even here, we may be struck by the fact that, unlike Lear or, apparently, Hamlet, Othello is certainly never obviously certifiable, leading us to note how delicately the borderlines of a distorted perception are plotted. This emphasis on the idiosyncratic viewpoint and its disjunction from external facts is further underlined by the drunkenness of Cassio, with its accompanying mood-altering tendencies, and his equally abrupt return to a more normal perspective. To some extent, similar effects may be found in other Shakespeare plays with which *Othello* has strong links: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its magic juices, and two other plays of jealousy, *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline* (jealousy being a condition peculiarly apt for the dramatization of belief in the false). In all of these, though, the presence of a supernatural element and of a comedic teleology allows for the realist mode to be overridden by the very different conventions of romance. It is uniquely in *Othello* that modes of representation and narration are systematically explored exclusively within the confines of the "realist" mode (*pace* Rymer!) and of a theatricality that is never (as it is with inset plays and masques) explicitly extradiegetic.

In the case of *Othello*, the play's concern with narration has been often noticed (see for instance Gardner; Bayley; Sinfield; Bates; Wayne; and Purkiss). Mark Thornton Burnett remarks that "in *Othello*, stories abound and conflict with each other, and the play delineates the attempts of characters to construct narratives for themselves which will permit them to understand personal preoccupations, to replace fear with certainty and self-assurance" (62). Thomas Moisan comments that "*Othello* engages us intertextually in the kinds of narratives, and narrativity, from which it derives its fable" (50), while Stephen Greenblatt sees the play's characteristic process as "submission to narrative self-fashioning" (234). Patricia Parker also takes this insistence on narrativity as the springboard for her telling examination of the function of "dilation" and "delation" in the play ("Shakespeare and Rhetoric" 54-74; see also Callaghan 61). I propose to argue, however, that it is not merely the fact of narration but the modes of narration, and their implications for dramatic representation, on which the play centers. In particular, *Othello* demonstrates a consistent concern with speaking, writing, performing, and narrating.

Not only does *Othello* insistently emphasize the telling of stories, it also shows, in Iago's case, the means by which they are concocted, and such means,

grippingly, seem to include tricks of mind and speech hovering just below the level of full consciousness. The play itself registers a conspicuous interest in the logic and status of the dream as a mode of representation. Unlike *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which it may seem to resemble in the extent of this concern, *Othello* has no play-within-the-play; it does, however, offer repeated instances of a kind of ventriloquization, by means of which one character co-opts the voice of another either innocently or as a technique of willful misrepresentation. Finally, *Othello* also lacks, unlike Shakespeare's other tragedies, a scene in which the text of a letter is read aloud and glossed; nevertheless, it contains a number of packed and allusive images that center precisely on the decoding and on the communicative status of written, as opposed to oral, texts. Through examination of Shakespeare's representation of all these representational modes, I hope to reflect on the aesthetic experience afforded by a theatrical performance of *Othello*. The play may encode a sophisticated understanding of the problematics of the meaning of meaning, but it can still speak a raw language of pain.

Othello opens with the words "Tush, never tell me" (1.1.1); its closing lines are Lodovico's promise: "Myself will straight abroad, and to the state / This heavy act with heavy heart relate" (5.2.371-2). Here the business of narration is directly foregrounded, and the impulse to recount offers the only form of comfort that seems available to the surviving characters in the face of the tragedy that they have witnessed. It is not only in the face of disaster, however, that characters are moved to tell tales; it is, on most occasions, more or less their first impulse. In our first encounter with Iago, he and Roderigo are quite literally telling tales, as they attempt to convince Brabantio that his daughter has eloped with Othello. When Othello himself enters, the story that he tells of himself to the Senate casts him as the consummate teller of exotic romance narratives, as he speaks to Desdemona of "The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3.144-5). Burnett comments of this that "Othello's story caters to assumptions about his status as a black man even as it seems to resist them: it closely resembles contemporary accounts of travels to newly discovered countries" (65).[1] There is, however, a curious reluctance on Othello's part to dwell on the processes of his own storytelling, for he actually seeks to render his own narration transparent and to obliterate all traces of its mediating effect on the facts of his life. His offer to the Senate is as follows:

> And till she come, as faithful as to heaven
> I do confess the vices of my blood,
> So justly to your grave ears I'll present
> How I did thrive in this fair lady's love,
> And she in mine. (1.3.122-6)

Othello promises to be both "faithful" and "just" in his recounting, proffering a realist narrative in which the action of retelling is in effect a recreating; moreover, the verb he chooses, "present," is suggestive more of an acting out than of a telling, with an echo of what Moisan has called "the uneasy antiphony the

play negotiates between its narrativity and its theatricality" (68). Othello will in effect replay the scene for them, except that in the absence of Desdemona — on which this whole interlude depends — he will also take her part.

Having thus secured the attention of his audience, he begins:

> Her father lov'd me, oft invited me,
> Still questioned me the story of my life,
> From year to year; the battles, sieges, fortunes,
> That I have pass'd:
> I ran it through, even from my boyish days,
> To the very moment that he bade me tell it. (1.3.128-33)

Here the mimetic properties claimed by Othello for his narrative enactment become even more pronounced. Both Moisan and Parker ("Fantasies") have pointed to the intimate relationship between difference and *différance* in narrative, between dilation and delation; this is precisely what Othello seeks to ignore as he presents his own narrative as transparent and authoritative, not as the product of rhetoric or art. His whole life is summoned up, its immediacy accentuated by its striking culmination in the "now" of Brabantio's command; and its truth is implicitly asserted by the starkness with which the potential fictionality of "story" is canceled out by the bald claim to factuality of "my life." The narrative process itself is not only elided but is, quite literally, figured as a gap, a moment of non-existence: Othello's life to date stops at the moment when Brabantio bids him recount it, not at the moment when he had actually recounted it. It is odd that storytelling, in many ways the key activity of Othello's life, is thus apparently not counted by him as a part of that life at all — although to recount the story of the whole of it must, presumably, have occupied quite some time. In this play in which the relationship of events to time is so thoroughly problematized, this is perhaps the most remarkable piece of temporal legerdemain of all. There is a slippage here that is further emphasized by the fact that Othello's invitation to Desdemona to "witness it" (1.3.169) coincides, literally, with her entrance: she is asked to attest to the truth of an account she has not heard, and this seems to arise not so much from any bad faith on Othello's part as from his blindness to the processes of narrative that differentiate his verbal reconstruction from the event itself, at which Desdemona has indeed been present and to which she could, therefore, witness.

What of the story itself? Is it really true, or, more importantly, since nothing in a play is, in one sense, true, would its various audiences have considered it to be so? It seems to me to be important in two major aspects: what it does say, and what it does not. It reveals strikingly little of either of those two primary demarcators of people (arguably in most circumstances, but overwhelmingly in Shakespeare's Venice), class or race background; it offers no clues about motivation. Instead, its primary function is to depict the exoticism and dangers of his travels, and Othello attributes its spectacular success in winning over Desdemona's affections to its fulfillment of this aim. This is certainly stirring stuff: a mere summary of it moves the Duke to comment, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (1.3.171). Is it plausible, though? The Arden edi-

tor comments of the Anthropophagi and the "men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3.144-5) that "such travellers' tales were current, and it seems as idle as the deserts to try to determine whether Shakespeare was primarily indebted to Mandeville or Raleigh or Holland's Pliny." Parker, however, remarks that "Othello's 'dilated' traveler's tale recalls Africanus, Mandeville, Pliny, and the rest" ("Fantasies" 98), all of whose veracity was much in doubt, and Jyotsna Singh describes Othello's "stories of slavery and adventure" as featuring him as "a 'character' in an imaginary landscape which viewers, then and now, recognize as a semi-fictional creation of colonialist travel narratives" (288).

Part of the attraction of "travellers' tales" is surely their overt improbability, and an age with a growing interest in anatomy and medicine might well be skeptical of men with heads beneath their shoulders. In this case, the lack of immediacy of this narration of a narrative is further figured by Othello's tautological replacement of the word "cannibal" with "anthropophagi." Cannibal, which seems in anagrammatized form to have provided the origin of Caliban's name, perhaps functions as an isolated relic of the native speech of which we hear so little in *Othello*; its replacement by the classical term "anthropophagi" thus symbolizes not only Othello's learning but also the firmness with which he is inserted into pre-existing discourses of travel that must radically inform and structure his ostensibly experiential account. Even as Othello thinks he tells his story, it in fact tells him, but he is as blind to its constitutive structures as he is to the narrative constraints that make the telling of the story as much a part of the chronological history of his life as the experience of it is. Othello, in short, thinks narration is a transparent mode, as he demonstrates again when he claims simply that "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul, / Shall manifest me rightly" (1.2.31-2) and that "My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue his complaints" (1.2.18-19). What Shakespeare's representation of narration shows the audience, however, is that narration is always already a representation that in fact remakes itself with each re-presentation.

Such consciousness of fictionality never features in Othello's account, but it is perhaps appropriate that Desdemona's immediate response to his story is to tell another, of a far more palpable mendacity than his own:

> she thank'd me,
> And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,
> I should but teach him how to tell my story,
> And that would woo her. (1.3.163-6)

Desdemona here seems clearly aware that the concoction of a fiction can be a useful mechanism for the direct manipulation of reality: upon this hint, Othello spake. It may well seem ominous that Othello here can register the disguised truth of Desdemona's story, recognizing it as a "hint" and as referring to himself and to her rather than to the putative "friend," but that he can show no awareness of his own imbrication in similar tactical ploys: implicitly, he already assumes mendacity in her and truth in himself. Ironically, though, Desdemona's fiction lies only to tell a deeper truth, which she cannot express in any other way.

What Desdemona knows, and Othello does not, is that narration is not a separate compartment from experience, a cut-and-dried rerun of it, but in complex and mutually formative interplay with it. The story that Othello has told of his life has resulted in a change to the story that, in the future, he will tell of it (as we see in act 5 when his anecdote of the killing of the Turk takes on new symbolic meaning when applied to his present circumstances); once again, the stress is on the materiality and the consequentiality not only of the narration but of the lived (or, on the Shakespearean stage, represented) moment of its representation. For Othello, though, essence and representation are consistently figured as fused. His attitude, and its difference from that prevalent in Venice, is perhaps best encapsulated in two paired moments in act 1, scene 3. When the First Senator is told that the Turks are heading for Rhodes, he dismisses the news with "'tis a pageant, / To keep us in false gaze" (1.3.18-19); when Othello's followers draw in his defense, he rebukes them as follows: "Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it, / Without a prompter" (1.2.83-4). The supersubtle Venetian senator plays with the discourse of theatricality, which he casts as inherently deceptive, but Othello draws no distinction between his own internalized behavior and the externalized fictionality of the stage, and registers no consciousness of the kind of perceptional fallacy that is so obvious to the Senator. It is in the same vein that he will later command Iago, "if thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought" (3.3.119-20).

Othello's absolute faith in the reliability of his own story as a transparent mediator of his experiences clearly prepares him all too well for his role as the dupe of Iago. From the outset of the play, Iago exhibits a sustained concern with modes of narration, persuasion, and figuring, both to oneself and to others. Suggestively, he registers an early awareness of a mechanism for self-narration of which he will later make very telling use, the dream: he assures Roderigo, "If ever I did dream of such a matter, / Abhor me" (1.1.5-6). He also mounts a miniature play-within-the-play in his use of inset dialogue to characterize (and presumably, in performance, to "impersonate") Othello:

> But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
> Evades them, with a bombast circumstance,
> Horribly stuff'd with epithets of war:
> And in conclusion,
> Nonsuits my mediators: for "Certes," says he,
> "I have already chosen my officer." (1.1.12-17)

Strikingly, Iago also refers to his own preferred method of communicating information: he feels that Othello should have promoted him on the grounds of sure personal knowledge, referring to himself as "I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof" (1.1.28). For all his later brilliance as a manipulative stage manager of the various representational strategies through which he will deceive Othello, and for all the sophistication in hermeneutics that leads him to explain to Othello the impossibility of ocular proof, it is precisely on such proof that his own claim is based. As the word "proof" re-echoes throughout the later part of the play (we hear it at 3.3.194-5, 200, 436, 448, and, as "prove," at 5.1.66), we may recall this *ur*-investigation of its problematics.

Iago's inability to prove even by proof is radically symptomatic of the problem he experiences in the early part of this scene. Although what he is telling Brabantio is true, he cannot initially get him to believe it — an ironic contrast with the ease with which he will later persuade Othello of a lie. The breakthrough, suggestively, involves a recurrence of the dream motif, as Brabantio moves from incredulity to declaring, "This accident is not unlike my dream, / Belief of it oppresses me already" (1.1.142-3). This prefigures Iago's later fabrication of a dream sequence involving Cassio, and it also exemplifies his most successful strategy of inducing his victim to internalize the persuasion. Interestingly, a later comment of Iago's is similarly prophetic: "I must show out a flag, and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign" (1.1.156-7). This not only plays grimly on his own role as Othello's flag-bearer; it equally affords an ironic prolepsis of his later co-optation of the handkerchief as literal "flag, and sign of love." Throughout the early stages of the play, Shakespeare lays great stress on the provisionality of Iago's plan, and on the processes of its formation — "A double knavery . . . how, how? . . . let me see" (1.3.392). To see the later developments of the scheme foreshadowed here may well be to glimpse Shakespeare's representation of something akin to dreamwork taking place in Iago's mental processes, and certainly this is echoed in the way Iago himself figures the progress of his strategy: "If consequence do but approve my dream, / My boat sails freely, both with wind and stream" (2.3.58-9). To some extent, the unfolding action of Othello does indeed reflect Iago's dream — or Iago's nightmare — come true.

In itself, and as it forms the main business of both Iago's plot and Shakespeare's, Iago's story is as circumstantial as Othello's own, and it is no more inherently improbable: indeed Coppélia Kahn argues that Iago himself effectively comes to believe it (143). Like Othello "presenting" his story to the senate, Iago too cements his narrative structure with carefully staged playlets: Cassio handing the stolen handkerchief to Bianca, Cassio drunk and fighting, Iago offering us his little vignette of Cassio's dream. In this last instance, Iago functions as a double of Othello's own performative style: just as Othello acts out Desdemona's part in her absence from the senate meeting, so Iago plays Cassio's role for him. In both cases the role of the subsidiary actor is ventriloquized: fictionally, we are offered their voices, but factually they are silent. Although it has no formal play-within-the-play, *Othello*'s exploration of theatricality repeatedly offers such moments of characters playing each other, from Iago's quotation of Othello's promotion of Cassio to the Duke's highly suggestive words to Brabantio, "Let me speak like yourself" (1.3.199); Iago will produce another such moment of role-slippage when he labels women "Players in your housewifery; and housewives in your beds" (2.1.112), and Othello makes perhaps the most poignant use of the motif when he firsts casts Emilia as a bawd (4.2.28-30) and then, ironically, pretends to misrecognize Desdemona as not being the whore that, in fact, she is not (90-2). It is this technique that will later allow Iago to attempt the incrimination of Bianca by a similar ventriloquization, this time involving the language of the body: "Stay you, good gentlewoman; look you pale, mistress? / Do you perceive the gestures of her eye?" (5.1.104-5). Finally, the ultimate act of ventriloquization will also be the

most poignant: Emilia, on her deathbed, will imitate Desdemona as she resolves, "I will play the swan, / And die in music: [Singing] *Willow, willow, willow*" (5.2.248-9). Emilia, unlike her husband, does not mean to deceive here; but both she and we are well aware of the precise status of this moment as re-presentation, since it is precisely from that quality that it takes its affective force.

Iago's relation to Cassio, though, is more sustained than any of these other examples of impersonation. In all of Iago's stage-managed episodes, Cassio is allotted a part, and Cassio's promotion is the reason for Iago's initial discontent: Iago sees Cassio in the role he had coveted for himself. Iago and Cassio are doubled in other ways. Famously, they twice offer closely juxtaposed and completely antithetical views of Desdemona: Cassio blazons her to the Cypriots (2.1.65), whereas Iago is "nothing, if not critical" (119), and their responses to the withdrawal of Desdemona and Othello for their wedding night are similarly counterpointed, Cassio seeing purity and Iago lust (2.3.15-25). Equally, though Cassio's lament for lost reputation is soon echoed by Iago's disquisition on good name (3.3.159-65), contrasts of dramatic context and rhetorical style make for a very different effect. Just as the substance of their speech is different, so is there a marked difference in the way they are received as tellers of stories. Whereas Iago's messages are, initially at least, habitually disregarded, Cassio's are avidly received, and he is repeatedly turned to as an informant of authority. When we first encounter him, Othello immediately asks him, "What is the news?" (1.2.36) and follows it up two lines later with, "What's the matter, think you?" (38). Arriving in Cyprus, Desdemona greets him with "I thank you, valiant Cassio; / What tidings can you tell me of my lord?" (2.1.87-8).

Most notable in this respect is the description of Cassio's own arrival on the island, which immediately follows the Third Gentleman's assurance that the Turkish fleet is destroyed:

> *Mon.* How, is this true?
> *Third Gent.* The ship is here put in,
> A Veronesa; Michael Cassio,
> Lieutenant to the warlike Moor Othello,
> Is come ashore: the Moor himself at sea,
> And in full commission here for Cyprus.
> *Mon.* I am glad on't, 'tis a worthy governor.
> *Third Gent.* But this same Cassio, though he speak of comfort,
> Touching the Turkish loss, yet he looks sadly,
> And prays the Moor be safe, for they were parted,
> With foul and violent tempest. (2.1.25-34)

The Arden edition prints "How, is this true?"; but it would be just as apposite to read "How is this true?" because that is what the passage is substantially concerned with. The precise mechanism of the transmission of this information is never uncovered (it cannot be "the ship" that speaks the message), but it is amply suggested by the introduction of Cassio's name followed by the idea of

"speaking." For once in the play, the process of recounting is rendered genuinely unproblematic: Cassio sees, tells, and is believed, and nothing occurs later in the play to undermine the substance of his report. There are other echoes of this sane world: Desdemona wants the Clown to "[b]e edified by report" (3.4.12), and Emilia's imagined story about the putative storyteller who has slandered Desdemona is, ironically, true. Equally, Bianca, despite the fact that she is told so little, manages usually to get a pretty accurate idea of what is going on through conjecture. Perhaps to some extent these moments of simplified decoding provide the same kinds of respite from tension as is supplied in other tragedies by comic relief, of which there is so noticeably little in *Othello*. Perhaps they afford us instead a sort of epistemological relief, though one that only makes more poignant our understanding of the machinations of Iago.

Iago's own approach to the transmission — or in his case to the distorting — of information is clearly characterized. He is himself a remarkably insensitive reader of situations, believing Emilia to be likely to commit adultery with both Othello and Cassio, believing Cassio to be in love with Desdemona, believing it possible that she might return the affection. Emilia's word for his wishes is, interestingly, "fantasy" (3.3.303). His recapitulations, in particular, are crude, albeit inflected for the benefit of Roderigo: "with what violence she first lov'd the Moor, but for bragging, and telling her fantastical lies" (2.1.221-2); "Lechery, by this hand: an index and prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts" (254-5). Iago's initial problem, seen from his own perspective, is no small one: a man whose announcements are rarely heeded must try to weave a convincing story whose success will depend entirely on people acting in certain ways that are, in fact, against their own interest. His first attempt at producing such a narrative is particularly fraught, since he must retell the story of the fight between Montano and Cassio, in the presence of both, in a way that while not seeming directly to incriminate Cassio will actually have precisely that effect; and he must, moreover, avoid being caught out in any of the lies he has told. In this last consideration, he sails particularly close to the wind. He tells Othello that he heard "Cassio high in oaths, which till to-night / I ne'er might see before" (2.3.226-7), and he thus comes dangerously close to contradicting his earlier assertion to Montano that Cassio's drunkenness is habitual. In fact, though, to focus exclusively on swearing allows him to deflect attention completely from the problematic issue of the frequency of Cassio's drinking, and his re-presentation of the affair has precisely the effects that he desires. Later, he will use a similar strategy when he deliberately makes his interlude with Cassio a dumbshow, an archaic mode of representation in theatrical terms but the only one that will do duty here. It is particularly ironic that this is overtly framed in terms that hint at its fictionality: Iago opens the episode with, "For I will make him tell the tale anew" (4.1.84), and Othello comments aside, "Iago beckons me, now he begins the story" (130); but Othello's uncritical attitude towards his own storytelling prevents him from perceiving the re-presented nature of even so crude and unrealistic (in metatheatrical terms) a device as the dumbshow.

The crucial role in Iago's story is of course that of Desdemona, but since she continually refuses to play it for him, Iago has to resort to an overt declaration of the unstageability of certain parts of his narrative:

It were a tedious difficulty, I think,
To bring 'em to that prospect, damn 'em then,
If ever mortal eyes did see them bolster
More than their own; what then, how then?
What shall I say? where's satisfaction?
It is impossible you should see this . . . (3.3.403-8)

This is an aesthetic strange to Othello, who is unused to the notion that any experience, however arcane, whether of slavery or of anthropophagi, cannot be summoned up for the imagination of the auditor. Iago, as his inability to convince Brabantio in the first scene showed, is a poorer narrator and stager than Othello, despite — or perhaps because of — his far more sophisticated approach to the problematics of representation. But his approach works because he is able to effect a gradual shift in Othello's horizons of narrative expectation. Initially, Othello adheres to his own ideas of the entire transparency of representational systems: he adjures Iago to "give the worst of thought / The worst of word" (136-7); he complains:

Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago,
If thou but thinkest him wrong'd, and makest his ear
A stranger to thy thoughts. (146-8)

Once again, Othello shows no consciousness whatsoever of the mechanics of representation: for him, the thought of one friend has immediate passage to the ear of another.

Iago soon sets to work on these ideas, however. It is remarkable how much of his attack on Othello consists not in the providing of evidence but in instructing his victim in new ways of interpreting evidence. When Othello demands, "give me the ocular proof" (3.3.366), Iago explains patiently, "It is impossible you should see this" (408). He amazes Othello by telling him of the alleged representational code of Venice: "their best conscience / Is not to leave undone, but keep unknown" (207-8). Othello, whose very identity is so extensively predicated on narration, responds in appalled fascination: "Dost thou say so?" (209) — a reply that ironically encodes the very problematics of representation that it discounts, since the fact that Iago says so does not make it true. Iago continues in this vein, repeatedly stressing an aesthetics of concealment:

Alas, alas!
It is not honesty in me to speak
What I have seen and known . . . (4.1.272-4)

And Othello is convinced. The man who earlier in the play is presented to us as the consummate narrator, and who has earlier demanded with such vehemence an accurate account of the origins of the brawl, begins to veer towards silence:

I should make very forges of my cheeks,
That would to cinders burn up modesty,
Did I but speak thy deeds. (4.2.76-8)

This is the effect of Iago's doctrine of the dangers of re-presentation, and it is potent indeed: Othello, the worker with words, will not use them now, and it is actually his refusal to make any more specific accusation than this that so radically disempowers Desdemona, since she can make no detailed rebuttal.

In more ways than one, then, Iago's machinations lead directly to the tragedy, for he not only feeds Othello false information but radically conditions his mechanisms for responding to it. Left alone, Othello mutters, "This honest creature doubtless / Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds" (3.3.246-7). Most terribly of all, this new belief in the power of the hidden does not completely override his earlier faith in the transparency of narration, but rather fuses with it. When Iago, mock-deprecatingly, asks, "Will you think so?", he replies at once, "Think so, Iago?" (4.1.1), suggesting that though the Moor has lost faith in signifying systems, he remains paradoxically and dangerously adamant about his own ability to decode them: even if everything Desdemona says to him is a lie, he can know the truth about her. He is, we recognize, caught up in the epistemological impasse of the Cretan paradox.

As for Desdemona herself, she remains blissfully unaware even of what story she has been cast in. This is revealed by her dogged persistence in pleading for Cassio and in refusing to believe that her husband could be jealous of her. In this respect, she may well seem to play into Iago's hands; certainly, in the stories that they have told of her, critics have frequently constructed her as naive, even irritating, in this part of the play. Equally, however, Desdemona's actions can be seen as arising from a total lack of awareness of the role scripted for her by both Othello and Iago. What she discovers is that even when she is physically present on the stage and apparently controlling her own behavior, she is still subject to ventriloquization through the interpretative strategies applied to her by others. When she does finally learn this, her response is an apt one in this play structured by narratives, for she too tells a story: displacing her own anxieties into the safely distanced world of fiction, in a classic narrative strategy, she tells the tale-within-the-tale of Barbary, her mother's maid, who at a time of grief herself fell back on the recounting of stories as she sang the "song of willow" that, though "an old thing," "express'd her fortune" (4.4.28-9). This bedchamber scene that shows us Desdemona and Emilia alone together is ostensibly colored by an atmosphere of intimacy, but actually it is largely structured by absences and silences, as Desdemona, instead of revealing to us her own innermost thoughts, tells us a story of a woman who told a story. As such, it can be taken to stand for all the stories in *Othello* that have a hollowness at their heart, as is so strikingly figured by the imaginary nature of the adultery that forms the very kernel of the play.

The most striking gap in any story in the play is perhaps that in Iago's. Famously, critics have been consistently unconvinced that the motivation that Iago himself describes is sufficient to actuate the levels of malice that he demonstrates. What is his hidden agenda, the secret self that he never reveals to us, what is his "dream" and his "fantasy"? To plug this gap, critics have offered stories of their own, reading Iago as anything from disgruntled soldier to repressed homosexual. On one level, it is arguable that this is because his part is in fact underwritten. But I would like to suggest that it may be precisely the secret of Shakespeare's success, of his universally acknowledged "greatness," that he habitually underwrites roles, and indeed whole plays, in ways that

provide immense stimulation to audience involvement and imagination. Iago is perhaps merely the most striking example of the phenomenon. Equally, his opacity may serve as an important corrective to Othello's own aesthetic of the transparency of narrative by reminding us of the inherent difficulties involved in all decoding. In an ultimate irony Iago, whose stories and whose ventriloquized playlets we know we must disbelieve, thus nevertheless becomes the most reliable voice to guide us in the proper interpretation of our own experiences of stage representation.

The difficulties of decoding are most strikingly figured at the very end of the play in a tale by that most innocent of tellers, Othello himself. Othello, fittingly, chooses to die as he has lived, recounting a story:

> Set you down this,
> And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
> Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,
> I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
> And smote him thus. [*Stabs himself.*] (5.2.352-7)

This is a story that obviously means a lot to Othello: he dies uttering it, giving it the talismanic force habitually attached to last words, and he is anxious that those hearing it should, in their turns, recount it. It is, however, unclear how exactly this relation relates to him. Initially, Othello is the hero of his own tales: has he now become the villain? Both the "I" and the "him" of the story (suggestively echoing Desdemona's earlier and more sophisticated comment that "I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise" [2.1.122-3]), he is himself both Turk and not-Turk, subject and object of his own narration. Perhaps, however, even to think in such terms is in itself to commit one of the most common (though at the same time one of the least, if at all, avoidable) of all interpretative errors: to read the self into the text. On a thematic and psychological level, of course, it obviously is a *roman à clef*; I am not saying that I cannot see the extraordinary symbolic force of having Othello at this crucial moment presented to us as that most demonized of others, the Turk. Mention of Turks may also, however, remind us of their abrupt disappearance from the narrative (if not the thematic) structure of the play at the opening of act 2, when all the narrative competence we possess encouraged us to expect them to form a major part of the story. It thus underlines the problematics and containing structures of the narrative mode itself.

This reminder that we ourselves have, during the course of the play, experienced problems with the decoding of narrative may serve to concentrate our minds on the interpretative processes of Othello himself, and in particular to make us aware of the delicately drawn relation between Othello as narrator and Othello as hearer. The logic of his account to the senate implies a stress on the presentness of representation, rather than on the element of re-presenting, which would allow for the introduction of difference. When he himself is told a story by Iago, though, he focuses instinctively on precisely those elements of the narrative that allow for the maximum flexibility of reader response and, ostensibly at least, for greatest interpretative leeway. Repeatedly, he imposes

his own guilt-based reading over the possibilities of innocence that Iago pretends to hold out to him. Iago's narrative, then, is for Othello both an accurate representation — a transparent account of events — and, simultaneously, a representation, a version of events offered by an inaccurate narrator whose poor readings must be erased in favor of those supplied by Othello himself. Though uncritical as narrator and spectator, Othello does, in many ways, pride himself on his performance as close reader.

The "reading" element of the interchanges between Iago and Othello is interestingly imaged at several points. One such passage is perhaps the most famous in the play, and as such may well be taken rather for granted: but when Iago declares that "trifles light as air / Are to the jealous, confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ" (3.3.327-9), we should, I think, be particularly attentive to the implied comparison between the suggestions he has been making to Othello and a written text. This is made especially pointed if we take "proofs" as meaning not only "evidence" but "page proofs," a usage first recorded by the OED in 1563 and with recorded occurrences also in 1600, 1612 and 1613. In a rather similar vein, Othello refers to Iago's mutterings as "close denotements" (3.3.127), and the idea of "note" there is precisely what Iago repeatedly invites Othello to do. This is a play that, uniquely among Shakespeare's "great" tragedies, has no written text-within-the-text. No letter is read out on stage and glossed, as they are by Claudius, Gloucester and Lady Macbeth, and Iago suggestively refers to Othello's "unbookish jealousy" (4.1.101). However, Iago holds out the alleged relationship between Desdemona and Cassio as a text that he himself has lightly annotated but that obviously requires much more extensive marginalia, and these Othello is only too happy to supply, as the two join each other in a happy game of glossing and outglossing in which Desdemona is the "most goodly book" "to write 'whore' on" (4.2.73-4). The proofs are, after all, only at proof stage; they still need to be corrected, and Othello can emend them to what he pleases.

It is at the close of the play that the emphasis on its textuality is most marked, as Lodovico laments, "O bloody period!" (5.2.358) with its connotation of the literal, printed full stop. Interestingly, Gratiano's response to this is that "All that's spoke is marr'd." As much as anywhere in the play, it is in this final scene that the dynamics and problematics of narration, representation and ocular proof find incisive exploration. When Othello, in a potentially highly bizarre moment, looks towards Iago's feet and finds them uncloven, he seems finally to have accepted the possibility that a story may be merely a "fable" (5.2.287); but only a few lines later his aesthetics of inalienably accurate representation is back in place as he implores, "I pray you in your letters, / When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of them as they are" (341-3). This in itself has a double-edged force: on the one hand, it returns to the misleading and mutually contradictory letters reporting the Turkish campaign against the Venetians, but on the other it chimes with the letters found on Roderigo's body (309-19), which have proved potent instruments to reveal the truth. "Proof" has, at last, come forth, and it is in the written text that it has surfaced.

The logic of Othello's own proof-readings is clear enough. As readers are so often tempted to do, he construes the story as centered on himself — as Des-

demona implicitly does with the tale of Barbary, and as Barbary in turn did with the "old song" which, both to her and to Desdemona, "express'd her fortune" — so that, for him, even an exchange between Cassio and Bianca becomes a story about himself and Desdemona. This is, of course, to say little more than that everyone reads from his or her own highly particularized subject position and that readers are frequently likely to make an immense emotional investment in works that have, objectively viewed, nothing whatsoever to do with their own lives, as can easily be illustrated by the common reaction to films of books that "he doesn't look anything like Heathcliff/Rhett Butler/Mr. Darcy." In one way, this is precisely the key to the secret of Iago's success with Othello, since it is by his omissions that he gets Othello interested enough in his narrative of Desdemona's supposed infidelity to make the Moor wish to fill in the gaps by his own imaginative engagement with them. Writing ourselves into films, books, and plays, we constitute a fantasy out of a narrative in ways very closely analogous to Iago's Hamlet-like "interpreter" role for the script elements with which the actions of Desdemona and Cassio supply him.

Othello, though, may operate rather differently. Michael D. Bristol, commenting on the story of the spectator who shot dead the actor playing Othello to stop a black man from killing a white woman, notes that "[g]iven the painful nature of the story, the history of both the interpretation and the performance of *Othello* have been characterized by a search for anesthetic explanations that allow the show to go on" (79). If Bristol is right, does the demand for the anesthetic actually foreclose our response to the *aesthetic* pleasures of the text? Rowland Wymer, discussing Webster and Ford, has recently commented that "[m]odern academic criticism, in its concern with meaning and contextualization, has often given an inadequate account of the experience provided by works of art," and he goes on to quote Susan Sontag's insistence that "[in] place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (Wymer 104). Perhaps our own highly tuned interpretative abilities, consistently trained to the making of meanings, tend to blind us to the possibility that at the heart of *Othello* lies an exposure both of the indeterminacy and opacity at the heart of all narratives and of the problematics of our own responses to them,[2] as the play insistently underlines in its repeated emphasis on both the hermeneutics and the erotics of enactment, reenactment, narration and representation. It is only in the re-presentation of *Othello* — in the temporally conditioned, imaginatively engaged process of responding to the actors' own engagement with it in the theater — that we re-experience the quality of the play's exploration of the dynamics of narration staged. Throughout the play, we are made powerfully aware of that urgent imperative that underlies the triple-layered use of the Willow Song, expression: "an old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune." Characters in *Othello* tend on the whole to be bad at explaining — both Cassio and Desdemona fail spectacularly at it — but they are good at expressing. Every time that the play is performed, they are given a rich and full opportunity to do so, which, as the play's own use of reading metaphors reminds us, touches us in ways distinct from the experience of reading.

Notes

1. See Cheadle for the interesting suggestion that "the reference to the anthropophagi could . . . even figure as Othello's most apposite rebuke of the man who has proved credulous in being prepared to believe in fabulous creatures no less than love charms" (492).

2. In the case of *Othello*, the norms of critical response have in fact been distorted by what Rochelle Smith terms "the tendency of *Othello* criticism to mirror the perspectives of the play's main characters." She cites various examples of this tendency (311).

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